



UK Task Force

on issues relating to Arab citizens of Israel

Israel's Arab citizens: Key facts and current realities

Introduction

Israel's Arab population currently constitutes twenty per cent of the overall Israeli population (numbering 1.7 million citizens) and includes Muslim and Christian Palestinian-Arabs, Bedouin and Druze communities.

In the government-backed Or Commission report published in 2003, it was recognised that more needed to be done to better integrate the Arab population into wider Israeli society. 50% of Arabs live in poverty compared to 20% of all Israelis and socio-economic gaps between Israel's Arab and Jewish populations are increasing year-on-year to the detriment of the Arab population.¹ The reasons for this are multiple and complex but it is widely recognised that narrowing these gaps will benefit Israel for four main reasons:

1. Equality will safeguard both the Jewish and democratic principles upon which Israel was founded, in accordance with the Declaration of Independence, which promises that the state *"will ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex."*
2. Equality will ensure a stable and peaceful future for Israel, improving social relations and breaking down barriers and prejudices.
3. Equality will strengthen Israel's economy. The lost potential to Israel's economy as a result of the failure to utilise the potential of the Arab workforce amounts to 31 billion shekels (£5.2 billion) a year.
4. Equality will bolster Israel's global standing and increase the chances of regional peace.

Since 2003, the Israeli government has begun to introduce a range of initiatives to try to improve the situation, including economic development plans, investment funds for the private sector, and affirmative action policies.

Key Facts:

- **Demographics:** Projections by the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics show that the Arab population will grow to 1,931,000 by 2020 (20% of the total population) and 2,361,600 by 2030 (23.7% of the total population).
- **Employment:** According to the Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, Arab citizens contribute only 8% to Israel's GDP, despite constituting 20% of Israel's population. Among Arabs aged 15 and over, 41.4% were employed in the civilian workforce in 2007 (357,000) compared to 59% among their Jewish counterparts (2,459,200). This disparity is primarily because of the low level of Arab women in the workplace (20.5%) compared to Jewish women (56.7%).
- **Health:** A 2007 Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics report indicated that the general rate of preventable deaths among Arabs was 1.5 times higher than those of Jews. For example, deaths from cardiovascular diseases were 1.6 times higher among Arabs than Jews.
- **Politics:** There are 14 Arab Members of the Knesset out of 120, representing 11% of MKs. Arab participation in elections has dropped significantly in recent years, from 77.6% in 1996 (and from a peak of 91% in 1955) to 53% in 2009.
- **Attitude:** According to a 2012 survey by Professor Sammy Smooha of Haifa University, 60% of Arabs regard Israel as their homeland, with 71% describing it as a good place to live and 68% preferring to live in Israel over any other country in the world.

¹ http://www.sikkuy.org.il/english/en2009/r_sikkuy09.pdf

Quotes from a range of political, religious, security and business leaders in Israel, relating to these issues:

"How many times does it have to be said that integrating the large minority population is the major challenge facing Israeli society? A challenge more urgent and more difficult even than reaching a peace settlement with the Palestinians. Whereas peace with the Palestinians depends on decisions, difficult as they may be, to be taken by the Palestinian and Israeli leadership at the appropriate moment - the integration of the minorities in Israeli society is a long-term process, to be achieved over many years, that can be carried out only as the result of a determined and consistent government policy dedicated to that aim. No single decision can do it." **Moshe Arens, former Israeli Minister of Defence and Foreign Affairs for the Likud Party, June 2011**

"Halakha underscores the right of minorities to live among us peaceably and with security. It says that members of these groups have the right to choose their places of residence, without anyone discriminating against them or injuring them with words or deeds... Carrying out development plans that enable these citizens to realise their rights... are obligations that are incumbent upon Israel's government and its Jewish majority in their dealings with Arab citizens. Honouring these obligations constitutes the appropriate Jewish, Zionist and human response to those who try to undermine the existence of a Jewish nation-state. Israel's existence as the independent state of the Jewish people will be judged by its success in integrating its minorities into society on the basis of equality, and the protection of their human dignity." **Rabbi Naftali Rothenberg, senior research fellow at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute and Rabbi of the community of Har Adar, November 2010.**

"The main challenge facing the Israeli government is how to connect Arab citizens with the State of Israel... In recent years the Shin Bet has taken upon itself the role of serving as a voice for assisting Arab-Israelis constructively." **Former Shin Bet Chief, Yuval Diskin, 2008**

"Reversing the relatively low rate of Arab participation in the labour force will increasingly be one of the keys to the success of the Israeli economy in the coming years." **Bank of Israel Governor, Stanley Fischer, December 2011**

"We must create conditions that will enable the full integration of Arab sector academics in the labour market... The Arab sector is a main growth engine for the Israeli economy, which has yet to be fully utilised, and I believe that their integration into the labour market will contribute not only to the Arab sector, but to the State of Israel as a whole." **Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, June 2012**

Case Study: Wajdi Biadsi, 26 year-old Arab accountant from Baka al-Garbiyeh

Most of certified public accountant Wajdi Biadsi's classmates managed to find internships at major accounting firms while they were still students. But for Biadsi, 26, who hails from the Israeli Arab town of Baka al-Garbiyeh, the process was rather more difficult.

"One day I went through three office towers in Ramat Gan and handed out more than 60 résumés, but not one invited me for an interview," he remembers. "There is a flood of candidates in the industry, and very few people from the [Arab] sector succeed in integrating into Jewish firms. In some cases I saw that they simply glanced at my résumé, read my name and where I live, and sent me on my way," he said.

Biadsi finally managed to find a job at the Amos Kopolowitz accounting firm in Ramat Gan. "It was important to me to work at a Jewish firm, since they are more professional. Without willingness from the employer, my friends and I from the [Arab] sector will remain behind," he said.

"My advice for someone who is having a hard time finding work is not to give up. Go to the offices and knock on doors. Even if at the beginning you need to compromise and take a job that doesn't fully suit you, don't stop looking. In the end, a crack will appear and you'll be able to get through," he said.

Source: 'They glanced at my résumé and sent me on my way' by Guy Grimland. Published in *Haaretz Newspaper* on 10 March 2010

Questions your Chanichim may ask you:

1. Who are Israel's Arab citizens?

Israel's Arab population is comprised of communities that pre-dated the formation of the state, previously living under Ottoman and then British Mandatory rule. They currently constitute 20% of the population, numbering 1.7 million citizens - the religious majority of which are Muslim (84%), with large Druze (8.1%) and Christian (7.8%) populations.

Most Arab citizens live in the north of the country, in majority Arab towns. Around 60% of the Christian Arab population are concentrated in Nazareth and Haifa, while the Druze live largely in the Galilee and Carmel regions. The Druze have traditionally rejected Arab-Palestinian nationalism, favouring strong affinities with their country of residence, making them the most well-integrated of the Arab minority in Israeli society, strongly identifying as Israelis and well-represented in the political, military and public sectors.

Within the Muslim Arab group there are around 200,000 Bedouins, descended from formerly semi-nomadic tribes, who have a range of cultural traditions that distinguish them from other Arab Muslim groups. Most Bedouin live in the Negev region of southern Israel, with a sizeable population in the Galilee in northern Israel. The majority have permanently-settled in towns and villages purposely built by the Israeli government, although a significant number live in unrecognised villages.

2. How do they identify themselves?

Israel's Arab population are often referred to in official and public discourse as 'Israeli Arabs', 'Arab citizens of Israel', 'Palestinian Arab' or as 'Palestinian citizens of Israel'. Identity is particularly complex for Arabs living within Israel, and they tend to identify by ethnicity and religion rather than nationality. Research conducted by Professor Sammy Smooha for the University of Haifa's Annual Index of Jewish-Arab Relations has shown that in 2009, 59.6% of the overall Arab population identified themselves in a form that incorporated the term Palestinian. While as recently as 2003, the majority (53%) defined themselves as Israeli Arabs without the Palestinian identifier. This shift is seen to be symptomatic of increasing tensions between the Jewish and Arab population groups in Israel.²

3. Do they recognise Israel's right to exist?

The 2012 Index of Jewish-Arab relations, released by the University of Haifa on 7 June, has found that 58% of Israel's Arab citizens accept Israel's definition as a nation with a Jewish majority, with 60% regarding Israel as their homeland and 71% describing it as a good place to live. Other polls have found that a majority were willing to recognise Israel as a Jewish state as long as they were given full rights and protected against discrimination, and strongly supported greater economic, political and social integration. Whilst many Arab citizens of Israel are sympathetic to Palestinian self-determination and statehood and are often critical of Israeli policy in Gaza and the West Bank, the majority have integrated into Israeli society, do not support violence against the state, and have no interest in conflict.

4. Do Arabs have equal rights in Israel?

Israel's Declaration of Independence vowed to form a state that would "ensure complete equality of social and political rights to all its inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex" and provide Arab citizens with "full and equal citizenship and due representation in all its provisional and permanent institutions." Arabs have the right to vote and equal rights protected by the Israeli legal and judicial system. Despite being equal in law, the government-backed 2003 Or Commission report identified a widespread imbalance in the distribution of public funds between Jews and Arabs and stated that more needed to be done to alleviate discrimination and reduce unequal access to state services between Jews and Arabs.

² http://soc.haifa.ac.il/~s.smooha/uploads/editor_uploads/files/IndexOfArabJewishRelations2003_2009.pdf

5. Do Jews and Arabs have the same standard of living?

Socio-economic gaps between Jews and Arabs in Israel are growing year on year to the detriment of the Arab population and an analysis of the 2012 State Budget by Mossawa found that despite constituting 20% of the population, Arab citizens of Israel receive less than 6.25% of the State Budget, as compared to less than 5% of the State Budget in 2011. The effect of this is shown in the fact that just over twice as many members of Israel's Arab community as Jews are below the poverty line. The Israeli government is seeking to reduce these inequalities through investment and state-sponsored schemes, working alongside NGO's and civil society initiatives. Interestingly, another report released by Sikkuy in September 2011, found that 60% of Jewish Israelis believe it is in Israel's interest to promote equality for Arab citizens. Moreover, 53% of Jews polled were disturbed by the inequality and 40% said that they would be willing to pay a personal price to reduce the socio-economic gap between Israel's Arab and Jewish population.³

6. What kind of jobs do they do?

Arab citizens are under-represented in the civil service, business, high technology and financial sectors, whilst over-represented in low-skilled trades that are more poorly paid. For example, out of 150,000 employees in the high-tech sector only 460 are Arab. As a result, Arabs contribute about 8% to Israel's GDP, despite accounting for 20% of the population. The average income of an Arab household is between 57-70% of a Jewish household, partly because Arabs are under-represented in highly skilled and better paid careers, but also because female unemployment in the Arab sector is much higher than for Jewish women. According to the Israeli government, the lost potential of the Arab sector is worth 31 billion shekels (£5.2 billion) a year, and higher employment, especially in the high-tech sector, would create a large increase in Israel's GDP, benefitting all its citizens.

7. How are Arabs represented in the political system?

Arab members of Knesset (Israel's parliament) have been elected at every general election since Israel was founded. Following the 2009 general elections, 14 out of 120 Knesset members were Arab, and although some belong to Israeli-Arab political parties such as the United Arab List or Balad, there are Arab MK's in Likud, Kadima and Labor. In April, a former Likud politician Sarhan Bader won the government's backing to form the Israeli-Arab Nationalist Party, a Zionist and Pro-Israel group that hopes to join a future coalition and more effectively advocate for Arabs in Israel. However, Arab participation in elections has dropped significantly in recent years, from 77.6% in 1996 (and from a peak of 91% in 1955) to 53% in 2009.

8. Do Arabs serve in the IDF/military?

Military service in Israel is currently compulsory for Jews and Druze, with exemptions for ultra-orthodox Jewish students and most Arabs, although any citizen can volunteer for military or national service. Druze serve in either a Druze battalion or mixed infantry and Special Forces units, with several rising to the rank of Major General, one rank below the most senior position in the IDF. Thousands of Bedouin serve in the IDF, partially encouraged by financial and educational incentives, and although Christian and Muslim Arabs are eligible for military service, their participation is relatively rare. This may soon change, as in August 2012 the Israeli government is due to pass a new law for mandatory national civic service, to replace the Tal Law – which allows ultra-Orthodox men to indefinitely defer army service and has been ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Although it is unclear whether this new law will include Arab citizens, a recent poll conducted by The Jerusalem Institute for Israeli Studies, found 62% of Arabs were in favour of civil service becoming compulsory for Arab citizens within the next five years.⁴ This finding clashes with the position of the Arab leadership, which calls for the boycotting of civil service and it indicates that a large gap exists between the Arab leadership and the general public on matters relating to integration into the State of Israel.

³ http://www.sikkuy.org.il/english/hasamim/shivion2011_english_abstract.pdf

⁴ <http://www.jiis.org/.upload/Survey%20-%20Arab%20Citizens%20-%20final.pdf>